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ABSTRACT

An alternative to the traditional history survey course, which is becoming less and less popular, is described. The goal of this project is to shift the emphasis from coverage of content to the development of skills necessary to understand that content. This particular project focused on colonial America, which covers a portion of the first of three quarters of a community college United States history survey course. The methodology will eventually be used in all three quarters. The principal theme around which the course is organized is change: the degree to which environment, settlement patterns, demographics, social and economic conditions, philosophical and psychological factors, and other circumstances forced colonial leaders to alter their thinking about community and social order. In contrast to traditional courses, students use primary sources, write extensively, and use the instructor more as a facilitator than a lecturer. Students participating in the project showed enthusiasm, increased participation, improved attendance, and lower than normal attrition. Teaching such a course also encourages instructors to keep current in their field and to be responsive to student interests. (IS)

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"What then is the American, this new man?"
-- de Crevecoeur

Modernization and the Changing Nature of Community in Colonial America

A "Moment" in the United States History Survey Course

at

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

Richmond, Virginia

developed by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Community College Humanities Association (Charleston, SC, October 25-27, 1984).

Modernization and the Changing Nature of Community in Colonial America

History is the record of man's past, the account of his experiences, his efforts to define problems and to solve them, and his successes and failures in those endeavors. The components of that record go well beyond man's development of institutions -- political, economic, and social. They include his view of the world and his place within it; his ideas about his past, his present, and his future; his fears and his hopes; his dealings with others, those who think like him and those who do not; his inclination to create and to destroy, to preserve and to alter. In a word, that record encompasses as much as we can recreate of what some have termed "the totality of human experiences."

The principal advantage to studying that record is to learn from it. To accomplish that, we must confront its contents, not just observe them. We must try to go beyond the whats of History to the whys and what-ifs. We must be willing to ask questions about the past, to speculate as to its alternatives, to pass judgements on its results. It is when we engage historical information that we become students of the past rather than passive witnesses to it. It is this spirit of making History students active learners from the past as well as of it that motivates this project.

Introduction

The principal theme for this "moment" (more below) in early American History is change -- the degree to which environment, settlement patterns, demographics, social and economic conditions, philosophical and psychological factors, and other less easily identified circumstances forced colonial leaders to alter their thinking about community, about its principal ingredients, and about how best to achieve the social order, the harmony, and the internal stability usually associated with one's idea of the "ideal community." To contrast England's mainland colonies in 1750 with the America that

existed less than a hundred years earlier is to come face-to-face with what amounted to virtually different societies. The typical colonist in 1650 (if one could find such) could not even conceive of an existence beyond the confines and the protection of Mother England. His contemporary a century later thought that at least a possibility, if not a probability. And more than a few of his neighbors agreed with him. What had happened? How can one best illustrate the degree of change which had occurred in less than a century? More importantly, how can we insure that the student time invested in trying to find answers will pay dividends beyond mastery of the content? How can we convert the experience into development of analytical and synthetic skills applicable to a grasp of other "moments" in the past and to a more meaningful understanding of this moment in each student's life? Such are the real objectives of this project. Its success can be determined within the History classroom to a limited extent at best. Its real potential for good can only be determined after each student leaves it.

Origins and Rationale

This project addresses Colonial America, barely a third of the first of three quarters in the United States History Survey course at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. The methodology for teaching it eventually will span the entire three quarters. It took root at an Institute on the so-called "New History" held in June 1984 at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Sponsored by the Community College Humanities Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute addressed a problem few History instructors are willing to admit, even to themselves. The survey course — United States History, Western Civilization, World History, et al -- is in deep trouble! Coverage of content has become dangerously superficial, and

will become even more so; student interest in the course is almost impossible to find; few faculty members want to teach it; fewer students want to take it; and curriculum developers are more and more reluctant to require it. The situation calls for more than gimmickry. This project suggests the answer.

What Was Done? Project Objectives

This project proposes an alternative to the traditional survey course which goes to the very heart of the classroom experience -- what students learn. It shifts the emphasis from coverage of content to the development of skills necessary to understand that content. By focusing on selected periods of the past, termed "moments" (in this case, Colonial America), and by incorporating materials from disciplines other than what is usually termed "History", we can begin to provide students with a more complete picture of the past, one which includes everyday people wrestling with everyday problems. For the first time, students can begin to experience the past and the people who lived it. They can finally find time to process information, to synthesize it, to see implications and assumptions within it, to evaluate it, to make informed judgements about it, to better understand the historical context within which it makes the most sense, -- in a word, to learn from it. Breadth and depth replace the seemingly endless flow of facts which dominates the traditional survey course. Students can really begin to experience the process of "doing" History, of assigning meaning to the past instead of passively observing meaning which is supplied by others. Only when we take students behind the scenes of man's past, between the lines of its written record, can we expect them to engage content actively. Until then, they may learn snippets *of* the past, but can never learn *from* it.

Needless to say, there are important considerations to this experience which warrant comment. Foremost among them, perhaps, is the admission, difficult for many of us, that the "Plato-to-NATO" approach we have always used has been neither effective nor productive. What then can we expect from business-as-usual in the History survey course in the face of an information revolution which students look to us to equip them to handle? To be more specific, technology has given us access to new kinds of information about the past, information which has yet to find its way into the traditional course. Can we continue to exclude such vital, albeit non-traditional topics as family organization and function, population movements and trends, relationships between classes, between races, between nationalities, between the sexes, between church and state, between the religious and the not-so-religious, between those who make the rules and those expected to follow them, between citizens and their political institutions? How could we include it all, even if we wanted to? What to leave out? This dilemma usually produces a syllabus totally resistant to change, or one rendered so superficial as to become inconsequential. Neither is acceptable.

This project proposes to sacrifice coverage for depth, to replace the quantity of one-dimensional information which leads us nowhere but toward the present with what amounts to a series of multi-faceted "snapshots" of moments in the past. The profit-to-loss ration in the exchange is a good one academically, for the skills developed and the insights acquired more than justify the time expended. Coverage time lost is easily recovered, for students know what to look for in terms of institutional development, values clarification, socio-economic relationships, conflict resolution, etc. And what is most unusual, they usually want to find out.

How It Was Done. Project Methodology

How best to accomplish what are admittedly ambitious objectives? Project methodology is best explained by addressing the three principal differences between this approach and the traditional survey course. The three are: 1) Use of Primary Documents; 2) Writing as a Vehicle for Learning; and 3) The Instructor as Facilitator. To elaborate on each of these:

1) Use of Primary Documents. The focus of classroom attention must shift from the usual presentation of information to student examination of the historical record, the documents selected for analysis in each moment. These materials, heretofore available only to professional historians or historians-in-the-making (graduate students and upper-division majors) become the "stuff" of student attention. All students. In this project, each student is historian. With guidance and support, students, individually or in groups, work to extract meaning from the sources and to evaluate findings against information gleaned from other areas. Depending on the quality of documents chosen and on the breadth of issues considered, students can begin to piece the past together, to recreate as nearly as possible the "totality of human experiences." It is an exercise in which all students can share and from which all can learn.

2) Writing as a Vehicle for Learning. Not to mention here all of the advantages to be realized from "writing across the curriculum," suffice it to say that all of them lend credibility to this approach. To do History is to write it. To write it is to understand it and to learn from it. It is to process information, to synthesize it, to formulate meaning from it, and to communicate that meaning to others. Among the "plusses" of studying History by writing it are the following: 1) the realization that education involves asking questions, not just answering them; 2) the willingness and confidence to reach judgemental conclusions about the past and about those who lived it;

3) the creative experience of bringing together seemingly disparate pieces of information to support meaning which is totally one's own; 4) the ability to distinguish between historical fact and interpretation of fact; and 5) the ability to process and order information as a means to distinguish the important from the unimportant.

3) The Instructor as Facilitator. The nature and degree of student activity just described suggest a somewhat different role for the classroom instructor. In this environment the instructor must facilitate student learning by becoming a resource and a guide instead of the traditional font of all wisdom and knowledge. As research historian, the instructor assembles source materials for each moment selected. What students derive from this course will depend largely on the quality of research conducted before it begins. As teacher, the instructor assists in the search for information and in the formulation of meaning supported by the evidence available. No longer does he disseminate either. To present to students as the "stuff" of History the wisdom which one has gained from tackling the record of man's past is to deny them all of the advantages of "doing" History for themselves. It is to inhibit learning, not enhance it, for it reduces the student to a non-participant in his own education. But to witness the excitement of real discovery and creativity in the classroom, to share in learning experiences that are really substantive -- these become probable, not just possible in this environment. Here is the kind of teaching no technology can supplant. To cite a cliche -- "You had to be there!"

How Effective Was It? Evaluation

In a sense, much of the evaluation of this project is contained in the narrative just concluded, for most of the outcomes which I have suggested might happen did happen.

Student enthusiasm, increased participation, improved attendance, lower than normal attrition, and an environment where people talked more about successes than failures, about what they learned, not what they missed -- these were all visible results of the effort. Unlike traditional courses where performance is measured by comparing student mastery of a fixed body of content, this approach enables everyone to be challenged and to experience success, for it makes individual progress easier to measure and to reward. Each student is evaluated according to a somewhat individualized standard of achievement, based ultimately on breadth and depth of understanding, not on one's facility to recognize and to memorize. In this context, the weakest student can contribute, can improve, and can succeed. What better incentive to improve skills than a victory or two?

Another advantage to this approach is its flexibility. By changing moments periodically, instructors can avoid the greatest danger in teaching survey courses -- the tendency to "grow stale" in one's discipline and in the classroom. It is an approach which forces historians to pursue research interests, to remain current in the professional literature, and to respond substantively to student interests and needs. For community college instructors, this is a major consideration for trying it. The upper division courses we never get the opportunity to teach can become the "moments" which we teach all the time.

All-in-all, I would term the project a resounding success, not only for what it has accomplished, but for what it promises. It has proven to be an idea rich in potential. For the introductory History course, how long since we have been able to say that?

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